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C O N F I D E N T I A L NIAMEY 000616

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, INR/AA, DS/IP/AF AND DS/IP/ITA
LAGOS FOR DEA

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TAGS: PGOV SNAR NG

SUBJECT: NIGERIEN PRESIDENT CONCERNED WITH SMUGGLING

REF: (A) NIAMEY 607 (B) NIAMEY 401 (C) NIAMEY 188

Classified By: DCM Donald W. Koran for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (U) President Tandja devoted much of his April 23 speech marking the 12th anniversary of the agreement ending the Tuareg rebellion to blaming drug and weapons traffickers for recent insecurity in the north.

¶2. (SBU) Tandja also expressed his concern about drug trafficking to the UNDP resident representative, prompting the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Dakar to dispatch a three man team to Niger to look into the issue. In an April 24 meeting with donors and diplomats, the team said a key issue was whether the activity was purely criminal, or if there was a political angle to it. A French police advisor at the meeting confirmed that international criminal activity, particularly trafficking in drugs and people, was on the rise in Niger, due in part to efforts to crack down on such activities elsewhere. Much of the smuggling is overland across the Sahara, but there is growing smuggling of drugs by air from Niger to Europe, as evidenced by the recent arrest of a Nigerien woman in Brussels with 7.5 kilograms of cocaine. There was a consensus at the meeting that the GON had previously not been particularly concerned with drug and people trafficking because Niger was merely a transit point. The government is now seized with the issue because it sees the trafficking as potentially destabilizing. The team is in Niger until May 2.

¶3. (C) Comment: The March 1 attack by smugglers on a military patrol and the subsequent seizure of a large quantity of cannabis and weapons, including RPGs, suggests that the GON has reason to be concerned. There are indications that the smugglers were associated with the dissident Tuareg group the Mouvement of Nigeriens for Justice (MNJ), which has launched several attacks on Nigerien security forces in recent months.

Tuaregs have a long history of trans-sahara smuggling, and the GON appeared to largely look the other way until the MNJ began its attacks. Now, however, the GON sees a real threat from the smuggling and may be serious about combating it. While there have been suggestions of an AQIM link to the smuggling, we are not aware of any solid evidence of it. In addition to a new-found desire to combat trafficking, Tandja's focus on it in his April 23 speech was part of a continuing campaign to paint the MNJ as "bandits," rather than an insurgent group with a political agenda.

ALLEN